

SELF-DEFENCE / In Wen-Do, women are taught that they are not all-weak and their attackers are not all-powerful

Fighting for all they're worth

BY SEAN FINE
Social Policy Reporter

WHEN self-defence instructor Debbie Chard asks women whether they could fend off an attacker, they're dubious.

But when she asks them whether they could break an attacker's nose if he went after their children, their attitude changes. "They say, 'He'd be lucky to get away with a broken nose.'"

For Ms. Chard, who teaches a women's self-defence program known as Wen-Do, including a specially designed class for women in wheelchairs or on crutches, that is the essence of the course. "The experience of Wen-Do is knowing that we are as valuable as any child in our life that we love."

Valuable, and not as vulnerable as before. They may be weaker than their potential attackers, but they learn that they are not all-weak and their attackers are not all-powerful. Anger works better than pleading in most cases, they are taught.

"It's important for us to think not of a huge impenetrable hulking monster, but of a collection of vulnerable targets," says Pat Israel, a student in a wheelchair.

"My wheelchair is a weapon in itself," says Catherine Leitch, another student.

Across Canada, women are learning to defend themselves. But there does not seem to be an explosion of interest. In some centres, women say it is on the wane. That may be because women tend to be at greater risk from their intimate partners or family members than from strangers, women say.

"In some ways, it's less topical now than it used to be," says Lee Lakeman, an employee at the Rape Relief and Women's Shelter in Vancouver. "You don't tend to be ready to throw a kick or a punch at someone you know."

In St. John's, Jennifer Mercer, coordinator of the Inter-Agency Committee on Violence Against Women, says she knows of no special defence courses for women. "People are a lot more afraid of people they know, rather than strangers."

Women have also joined courses offered for both sexes. In Halifax, 250 of the 800 members of Carabin Tae Kwon Do are women. Keeping fit is the major reason people join, and self-defence is the second-biggest reason, says Charles Carabin, who runs the course.

In Toronto, Wen-Do Women's Self-Defence Corp., a non-profit group registered as a charity, offers a free eight-week course taught by Ms. Chard to 10 women with mobility impairments. Funded by the Ontario and city governments, it is the only such course in the country.

The city's parks and recreation department also offers Wen-Do courses free, and the board of education has brought in Wen-Do instructors to teach high-school girls, Ms. Chard says. The City of Toronto also offers its female employees free Wen-Do courses.

Wen-Do was developed by a Toronto couple 20 years ago with physical techniques drawn from karate and aikido, Ms. Chard says. Its guiding ideas are awareness, avoidance and action.

Students are told to trust their sense of danger. Even if they cannot spell out why they fear trouble, or if they do not want to embarrass a man who may or may not be dangerous, they should get away. Denial can be costly.

"Running away is what works most often for most women," Ms. Chard says.

The first line of defence is *kiyi*, a great yell or roar — "hohh!" — from the diaphragm. "It takes away the image the attacker has of you of being quiet and vulnerable," says Spirit Synott, a student in a wheelchair.

Kivi helps ensure that the woman does not freeze with fear. It is also part of the element of surprise.

"They would be very surprised," Joy Larocque, a student in a wheelchair, says of those who would try to attack her. "I find people think that because you're in a wheelchair, you automatically inherit a halo. We don't. We can be as miserable as anybody else."

If *kivi* does not frighten off a potential attacker, the women learn to



Spirit Synott, Susan Alsbury and Joy Larocque demonstrate Wen-Do, in which students are taught that most of the time anger works better than pleading.

(EDWARD REGAN/The Globe and Mail)

use whatever weapons are at hand — a wheelchair or crutches, hands, feet, elbows, shoulders, fingernails.

The eyes, ears and nose are among the targets.

"Eagle claws through the attacker's eyes," Ms. Chard calls out to her students so they can demonstrate techniques for a Globe and Mail photographer. (The reporter and photographer are not permitted to attend the class because it is closed to men; the women-only rule lets students discuss issues such as incest, sexual assault or relationship abuse more freely, and makes them feel more comfortable, Ms. Chard says.)

"Zipper punch to the nose, using those bony knuckles. ... Hammer fist down on the nose."

Ms. Chard says the students do not learn to match their force against the attacker's, since they are the weaker ones. Instead, they learn to use the attacker's force against him.

"Use the image of circularity," Ms. Chard says. "If someone pulls you [in a wheelchair], rather than resist and pull back, use that attacker's force to be pulled into their body and strike when you get there."

Ms. Leitch says Wen-Do has taught her how to make the most of her potential for defence. She says she took the course because others she knew had taken it and enjoyed it, not because she fears violence. "I've always felt somewhat impervious,

which is probably naive. I've lived in the downtown area and I've never felt unsafe."

Helena Spring, who walks with a cane, says she has always been a confident person, and not fearful, but she wanted to know what kind of choices she could make in case of an attack. "It's a lousy world out there."

Wen-Do students learn to protect themselves from their intimate partners as well as strangers, Ms. Chard says. Recognizing danger and getting away comes first, but is not always possible. "The understanding is there ... we'll do whatever is necessary to keep ourselves safe."

Man, 30, charged in attacks on women

Humber assault one of four

BY GAY ABBATE
The Globe and Mail

TORONTO — An Etobicoke man has been charged with four attacks on women, including a sexual assault on a 19-year-old Humber College student last Saturday.

Kenneth Thomas Davis, 30, was arrested early yesterday.

The Humber College student was assaulted about 9 a.m. on Saturday as she walked along the bicycle path south of the campus to her job at a drugstore at the nearby Woodbine Centre mall. She was grabbed, wrestled to the ground, choked and sexually assaulted, police said. The attack lasted about 20 minutes.

The attacker abandoned a blue mountain bike at the scene.

Staff Inspector Joe Wolfe of the sexual assault squad said yesterday at a news conference that the woman suffered some physical injuries, but they are healing and she is now back home. "As for the psychological injuries, only time will tell," he said.

Mr. Davis has been charged in three other attacks:

- On July 10, 1988, a 41-year-old woman who was walking along a bicycle path at Eglinton Avenue and Dundas Street West was attacked by a man with a knife. She was struck in the face several times and threatened with the knife. The suspect fled when a citizen interrupted the attack.

- On July 15 this year, a 47-year-old woman was walking along the bicycle path at Martingrove and Mercury Roads when she was grabbed from behind and thrown to the ground. The attacker attempted forced penetration, but he fled when a citizen approached.

- On Sept. 8, a 56-year-old woman who had been riding her bicycle in the park at the rear of Humber College was grabbed and pushed to the ground. Her screams drew off the attacker.

Mr. Davis has been charged with choking, assault, assault with a weapon and two counts of sexual assault.